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ABSTRACT

A study examined the differences between how men and women respond to expert political analysis of political debates and the extremeness of traits attributed to the candidates. Subjects, 30 males and 45 females enrolled in courses at the College of Journalism and Communication of the University of Florida in the fall of 1988, viewed the live broadcast of the Vice-Presidential debate on October 5, 1988. Thirty-five subjects viewed eight minutes of post-debate analysis while the other 40 subjects did not view any analysis. All subjects filled out the same questionnaire. Results indicated that (1) males and females who were less emotionally involved during the debate were similar in how extremely they evaluated the candidates; (2) females were less extreme in their evaluations after viewing the post-debate analysis; (3) watching the post-debate analysis had no effect on the extremeness of evaluations expressed by men who were highly politically involved; and (4) females rated Lloyd Bentsen as significantly less weak than did males. (Three figures of data and 33 references are attached.) (RS)

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EVIDENCE FOR DIFFERENTIAL EFFECTS ON MALES AND FEMALES IN THE WAKE OF POST-DEBATE ANALYSES

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Abstract

This study focused on the differences between how men and women respond to expert political analysis of political debates. The data were derived from a natural experiment conducted during the 1988 vice-presidential debate that investigated the effect of televised post-debate commentary on subjects' evaluations of Lloyd Bentsen and Dan Quayle (Ferguson, et. al). The extremeness of traits attributed to the candidates as well as the confidence subjects maintained about their assessments were examined. It was found that males and females who were less emotionally involved during the debate were similar in how extremely they evaluated the candidates. However, significant differences were found between males and females who were highly politically involved. Females were less extreme in their evaluations after viewing the post-debate analysis. In contrast, watching the post-debate analysis had no effect on the extremeness of evaluations expressed by men who were highly politically involved. Finally, females rated Bentsen as significantly less weak than did males.

INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen a proliferation of studies examining both sex and gender differences in social psychology, communication, and political behavior. These studies have shown that sex differences are often elusive. When differences are discovered, they are frequently related to other factors, such as the demographic variables of age, education, and socioeconomic status.

In the area of verbalization, on the other hand, studies have repeatedly found that females are more likely to give "don't know" responses than are males (Newman & Sheth, 1984; Kennamer, 1985). Kennamer (1985) examined differences between the ways in which males and females pay attention to economic issues in the media and their economic beliefs. "Belief" was operationalized by the number of knowledge questions subjects answered. Kennamer measured the number of times respondents believed they had information. Thus, for Kennamer what a person thinks he or she knows--i.e., beliefs held about attitude objects--relates to the confidence with which that attitude is held and, therefore, to its strength. He found that women expressed fewer beliefs than did men and that women were twice as likely to give "don't know" responses on belief variable questions. Women, in Kennamer's study, were less confident in their expression of beliefs than were men.

Andrews (1987) examined the confidence expressed by college-age women in their assessment of personal communication abilities. Women reported feeling less confident than men about their ability to communicate a persuasive message. Andrews' results reaffirmed past research findings that showed men project more self-confidence than do women in what they expect to achieve and that they judge their own performance more favorably.

The above studies address sex differences from a communication perspective. Sex differences are also a topic in studies of political behavior. Much of that research has focused on voting behavior differences between men and women. This is sometimes called the "gender gap" (Bennett, 1986; Goertzel, 1983; Newman & Sheth, 1984; Shapiro & Mahajan, 1986; Welch, 1977).

Goertzel (1983) examined the reasons for the gender gap. He found that, across the board, women are less inclined towards military spending than are men. He also maintained that the voting pattern attributed to the gender gap and ensuing political opinions occurs because women--especially those with low income--are more likely to be affected by economic policies.

Bennett (1986) also studied the gender gap. She found that--contrary to her expectations--women do not comprise a solid voting bloc. Instead, she observed a lack of political identification by women with other women. Her

research found a general lack of concern about Reagan's economic issues amongst women and men. She also found that when race of voters was controlled, the gender gap did not hold.

Newman and Sheth (1984) found that female voters are more concerned with issues than they are with political candidates' attributes.

Welch (1977) examined reasons why women are perceived to participate less than men in political activities. She concluded that the perception of "politically passive women" did not hold when situational and structural factors--that is, number and presence of women in social sectors that encourage political participation--were held constant. It was only amongst women with low education that Welch found them less politically active than men.

Anderson (1985) examined the stereotypical perception that politics is primarily a male function. She focused on the number of women in the work force and the women's liberation movement, an instigator of equal treatment for the sexes. Anderson asserted that political participation evolved more from a sense of equality--out of change in "women's conception of their proper political role"--than from women's entry into the work force (p. 450).

In terms of women's confidence and political participation, Rapoport (1981) found that adolescent females in general were not likely to express attitudes of any kind.

This reluctance to express attitudes is a precursor to adult females disinclination to persuade others politically. Hence, Rapoport concluded that the socialization process of women's political behavior begins during adolescence.

The need for more studies which investigate differences between the sexes has long been a mandate of feminist theorists. Wartella and Treichler (1986) point out that more studies need to be done concerning women and communication theory in order to answer theoretical questions regarding the social and cultural conditions that create sex differences. How such conditions can be changed so that sex differences may be understood also merits attention. Wartella and Treichler contend that feminist theory and research offers a "social theory which attempts to account for the social and cultural construction of sexual difference" (1986, p. 1).

Our research deals with the nature of that difference. Its purpose is to examine the differences between how men and women respond to expert political analysis of political debates. Our examination of sex difference research reveals that there is little conclusive evidence that men and women, indeed, differ. When they do differ, they do only on a few variables. While some researchers support the gender gap--that men and women differ on economic policy and military spending--other researchers do not support it. The gender gap does not exist when education, race, and employment

status are controlled (Bennett, 1986; Welch, 1977; Anderson, 1975). Studies have found that while women may be more reluctant to express opinions or to attempt to persuade others concerning politics (Kennamer, 1985), sex differences are not as strong when we look at voting behavior (Newman & Sheth, 1984). Men and women do consider the same things--that is, issues and candidate traits--when voting.

Research Question

Our main research question deals with the possible differences between men and women in their expression of opinion in a political setting: Do males and females differ in their confidence and extremeness of trait evaluations, as a result of exposure to post-debate analysis of candidates' performance by the media? And are these differences related to their emotional responses during the debate and their levels of political involvement?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: For confidence ratings of political candidates, there will be significant differences between males and females, with males expressing higher levels of confidence.

H2: For extremeness of attributions, there will be significant differences between males and females, with males giving more extreme trait evaluations.

Conceptualization

Distinctly conceptualizing our terms is the first step toward a more cohesive approach to sex difference research. Previous research has often used the terms "gender" and "sex" interchangeably. We use the term sex differences rather than gender differences. Unger (1979) defines gender as the "nonphysiological components of sex that are culturally regarded as appropriate to males or females" (p. 1086). Thus, the term "gender" connotes masculine, feminine, and androgynous attributes of people: it is a social label by which we distinguish two groups of people according to those attributes. Our research is concerned with differences between biological sexes, not cultural genders.

Extremeness, in the context of our research, is not intended to connote a sense of dogmatism (negative) or enthusiasm of belief (positive). Rather, we use extremeness in reference to opinion polarization.

A factor we associate with extremeness is confidence--that is, strength of belief conviction. Our use of "confidence" is based on aforementioned research, which used the concept in reference to the willingness to express opinion and to profess knowledge.

Some gender gap research has found that men and women are similar in their concern about issues and candidate traits (Newman & Sheth, 1984). Such research has also found

that the issues that concern men and women are different (Goertzel, 1983). We were curious to see if males and females differ in their evaluations of candidates with exposure to post-debate analysis by experts. In light of this, we surmised that women would be less confident in their opinions of politics--including opinions of candidates.

Method

Data and Sample

The data used in this study were gathered in a natural experiment conducted during the 1988 Vice-Presidential debate (Ferguson, et al., 1989). The study investigated the effect of televised post-debate commentary on subjects' evaluations of the vice-presidential candidates, Lloyd Bentsen and Dan Quayle. The subjects were 75 students enrolled in courses at the College of Journalism and Communications during fall semester, 1988. The mean age of the subjects was 22.1 years old. There were 30 males (40%) and 45 females (60%) in the experiment.

All subjects viewed the live broadcast of the Vice-Presidential debate on October 5, 1988. After the debate, 35 subjects remained in the room and viewed eight minutes of a post-debate analysis broadcast. The other 40 subjects were taken to another room and did not view any analysis. Both groups completed the same post-debate questionnaire,

which included items on demographic information, political involvement, support for candidates, ratings of candidate personality traits, and the level of emotion they felt during the debate.

Extremeness

Subjects evaluated each of the two candidates on the following ten traits: knowledgeable, weak, honest, smart, unstable, open-minded, power-hungry, reckless, courageous, and prejudiced. These traits were derived from Kinder, Peters, Abelson, and Fiske (1980). Subjects were asked the extent to which they believed a candidate possessed each trait and then to indicate how confident they felt about their own evaluation of that candidate's traits. For example, the subjects indicated on a scale from 1 to 6 how knowledgeable a candidate was. Next, the subjects indicated whether they were "very unsure" up to "very sure" of their own evaluation.

The extremeness variable was derived by folding the scales so that subjects who gave a 1 or 6 would receive a score of 3, while those giving a 3 or 4 would receive a score of 1. The folded scales were then summed and averaged into an extremeness index. The overall mean for extremeness was 1.76 (sd = .31).

Confidence

Subjects' confidence in their ratings of the candidates' personality traits were measured on the same scale. These scores on the trait items were summed into overall indices of trait evaluations for each candidate (Ferguson et.al, 1988). The subjects' mean confidence rating for Quayle's traits was 4.2 (sd = .87). The mean rating for Bentsen's traits was 4.4 (sd = .75).

Independent Variables

The two major independent variables are: (1) sex (male or female) and (2) post-debate condition of the subjects (post-debate analysis or no post-debate analysis).

Due to the political nature of this study, the researchers deemed that subjects' level of political involvement merited inclusion as an additional independent variable. Political involvement was measured by a series of questions which asked subjects about their interest in politics, how often subjects discussed politics, strength of party identification, and how much they thought they knew about Bentsen and Quayle. A final item was a combination of five questions asking about voting history and intention. The political involvement index was constructed by standardizing each variable and creating a summed index using the six items.

Another variable of interest to the researchers is the level of affect the subjects felt during the debate. This

was measured with nine items which asked, on a 1-to-7 scale, how emotional, excited, angry, anxious, satisfied, elated, annoyed, provoked, and exuberant they were after the debate. The items were summed and averaged into an overall affect index. Overall mean for this index was 3.8 (sd = 1.1) (Cronbach's alpha = .84).

Analysis

Analyses of variance were conducted with sex, experimental condition, political involvement, and affect on the dependent factors extremeness, confidence, and evaluations of individual traits.

Results

Confidence

There were no significant results found for the confidence dependent variable. Hence, there will be no further discussion concerning this variable.

Affect and Extremeness

Affect was positively correlated with both extremeness (r = .27, $p \leq$ .01) and political involvement (r = .33, $p \leq$ .01).

A three-way analysis of variance (gender by condition by affect) was conducted for the variable extremeness. There was no main effect for gender on extremeness. However, a main effect was found for affect on extremeness. Subjects who expressed low affect scored lower on extremeness (M =

1.7) than those who expressed high affect (M = 1.8) ($F(1,73)$ = 6.56, $p \leq .01$).

A main effect was also found for experimental condition on extremeness. Subjects in the post-debate analysis condition scored lower on extremeness (M = 1.7) than those in the control condition (M = 1.8) ($F(1,73)$ = 3.85, $p \leq .05$).

In addition, there was a significant two-way interaction between affect and gender on extremeness ($F(1,73)$ = 4.23, $p \leq .04$) (See Figure 1). Among women who expressed low affect, those who were in the post-debate analysis condition scored lower on the extremeness variable (M = 1.6) than those women who did not view the post-debate analysis (M = 1.8), $t(22)$ = 1.85, $p \leq .04$.

Similarly, among men who expressed low affect, those who viewed the post-debate analysis were less extreme (M = 1.5) than those men who did not (M = 1.7), $t(12)$ = 1.42, $p \leq .09$.

There were no significant differences among those men and women who expressed high affect.

Political Involvement and Extremeness

Political involvement was positively correlated with extremeness (r = .30, $p \leq .01$). An analysis of variance revealed a near-significant interaction between political involvement and gender ($F(1,73)$ = 2.77, $p \leq .1$).

For women who expressed a high level of political involvement, those watched the post-debate analysis gave

less extreme evaluations ($\underline{M}$ = 1.6) than those who did not ($\underline{M}$ = 1.8), $\underline{t}(15) = 1.22$, $\underline{p} \leq .1$ (See Figure 2).

Men who had a high level of political involvement gave more extreme evaluations than those who had low levels of political involvement, regardless of condition (See Figure 3).

Out of curiosity, the researchers also conducted analyses of variance using gender and experimental condition on each of the individual traits the subjects evaluated the candidates. The only significant finding here was for the trait "weak" evaluated for Bentsen. Differences between male and female ratings of Bentsen's weakness were found at the $\underline{p} \leq .053$ level. Male mean rating of Bentsen was 1.80, while female mean rating was 2.15. Higher scores indicate less weakness (or, perhaps, strength).

A chi-square analysis was conducted to test if party affiliation could possibly explain this gender difference in ratings of Bentsen. No relationship was found between gender and party affiliation ($X^2(2) = 2.05$, $\underline{p} \leq .36$)

Thus, across both post-debate conditions, women regarded Bentsen as being less weak (or stronger) than did men. In other words, men regarded Bentsen as weaker than did women.

Discussion

The main focus of our study was sex differences in political communication. We expected to find significant

differences between males and females in their confidence and extremeness in their ratings of Lloyd Bentsen and Dan Quayle. Our hypothesis concerning confidence was not supported.

Concerning ratings of the candidate traits, women overall rated Bentsen as less weak than did men. We suspect Bentsen's age may have been a factor. Perhaps females regarded him as the stereotypical distinguished statesman, a "father figure" who is dynamic and believable. Males, on the other hand, may have perceived Bentsen to be "an old man." For them, age was a negative attribute, a sign of weakness. We realize this may suggest a bias on our part. Unfortunately, it is difficult to break away from inherently biased evaluations of the way in which males and females perceive others.

Our research question concerned subjects' emotional responses (affect) and political involvement. Regarding affect, we must point out that there were no significant differences among those males and females who scored high in affect. In other words, for both men and women who were emotionally involved during the debate, watching or not watching the post-debate analysis did not make a difference in how extremely they evaluated the candidates. However, among those who did not get emotionally involved in the debate, watching the post-debate analysis led to less extreme trait evaluations. Note that this is true for both

sexes--the differences were not between them, but between the conditions.

We found that males and females differ in extremeness when the independent variable of political involvement is considered. For women who were highly politically involved, their watching the post-debate analysis seemed to have led to less extreme evaluations. This seems to be in line with the "dampening" effect of post-debate analyses as reported by Ferguson et al. (1989). However, for men who were highly politically involved, exposure to the post-debate analysis did not seem to have any effect on the extremeness of their evaluations.

The key factor here, we believe, is political involvement. This was a highly salient event for those politically involved. Yet, for women, extremeness of evaluations appears to have been tempered by exposure to the post-debate analysis, while men's extremeness was not affected. This reinforces the idea that women may be more influenceable (Newman & Sheth, 1984). Thus, being politically involved seems to mean different things to the men and women in this study. We believe this finding lends itself to further investigation into the ways in which men and women differ in the level and intensity of their political involvement.

Replication of this study is strongly suggested to confirm and extend its findings. To improve its

generalizability, we suggest future studies use larger sample sizes and include subjects from different educational backgrounds.

We also suggest that future research of this type include measures for gender (masculine, feminine, and androgynous psycho-cultural) traits of voters to see how this correlates with the extremeness of and their confidence in their political candidate evaluations.

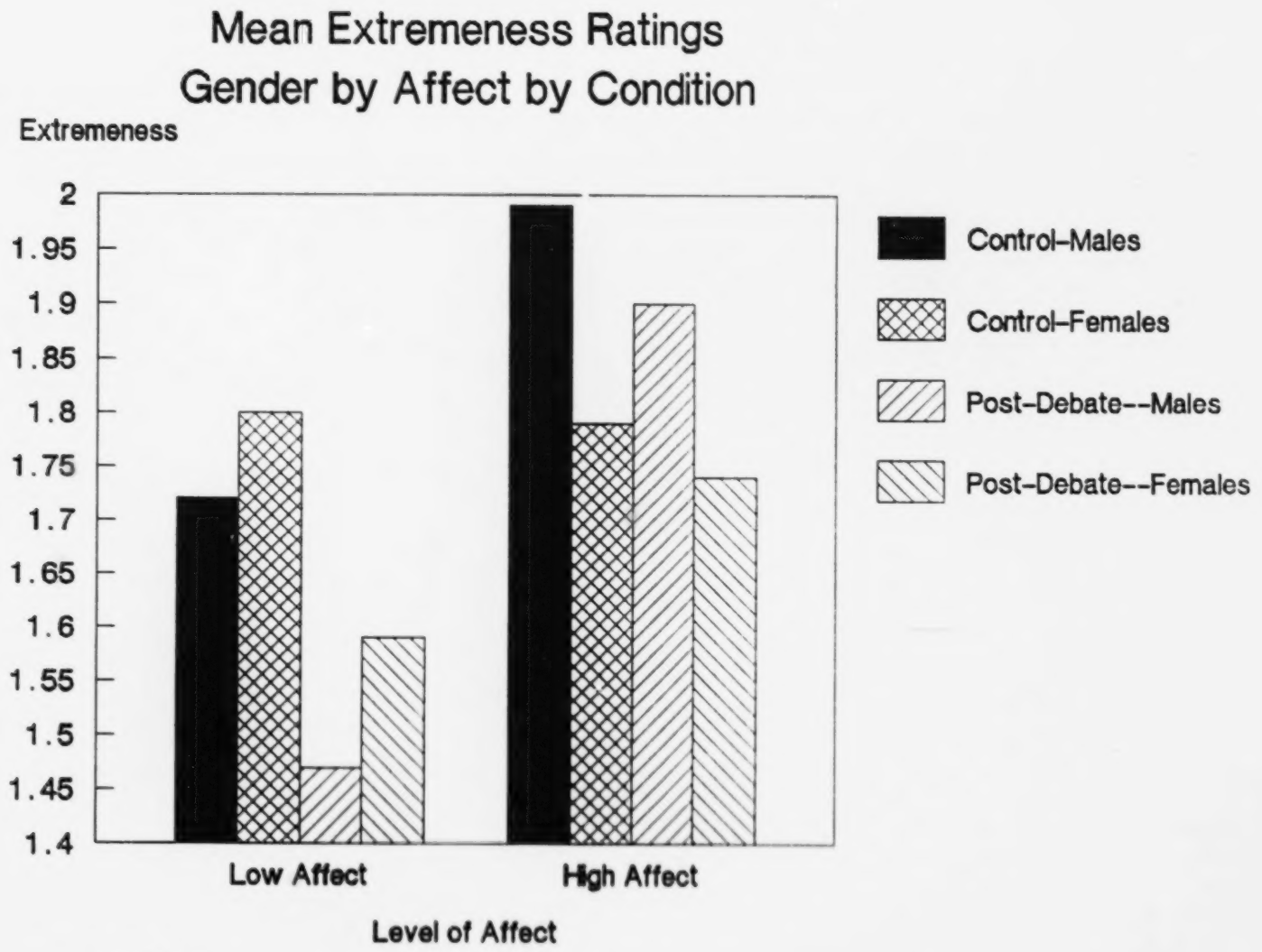
Mean Extremeness Ratings
Gender by Affect by Condition
Extremeness
2
1.95
1.9
1.85
1.8
1.75
1.7
1.65
1.6
1.55
1.5
1.45
1.4
Low Affect
High Affect
Level of Affect
Control-Males
Control-Females
Post-Debate--Males
Post-Debate--Females

FIGURE 1

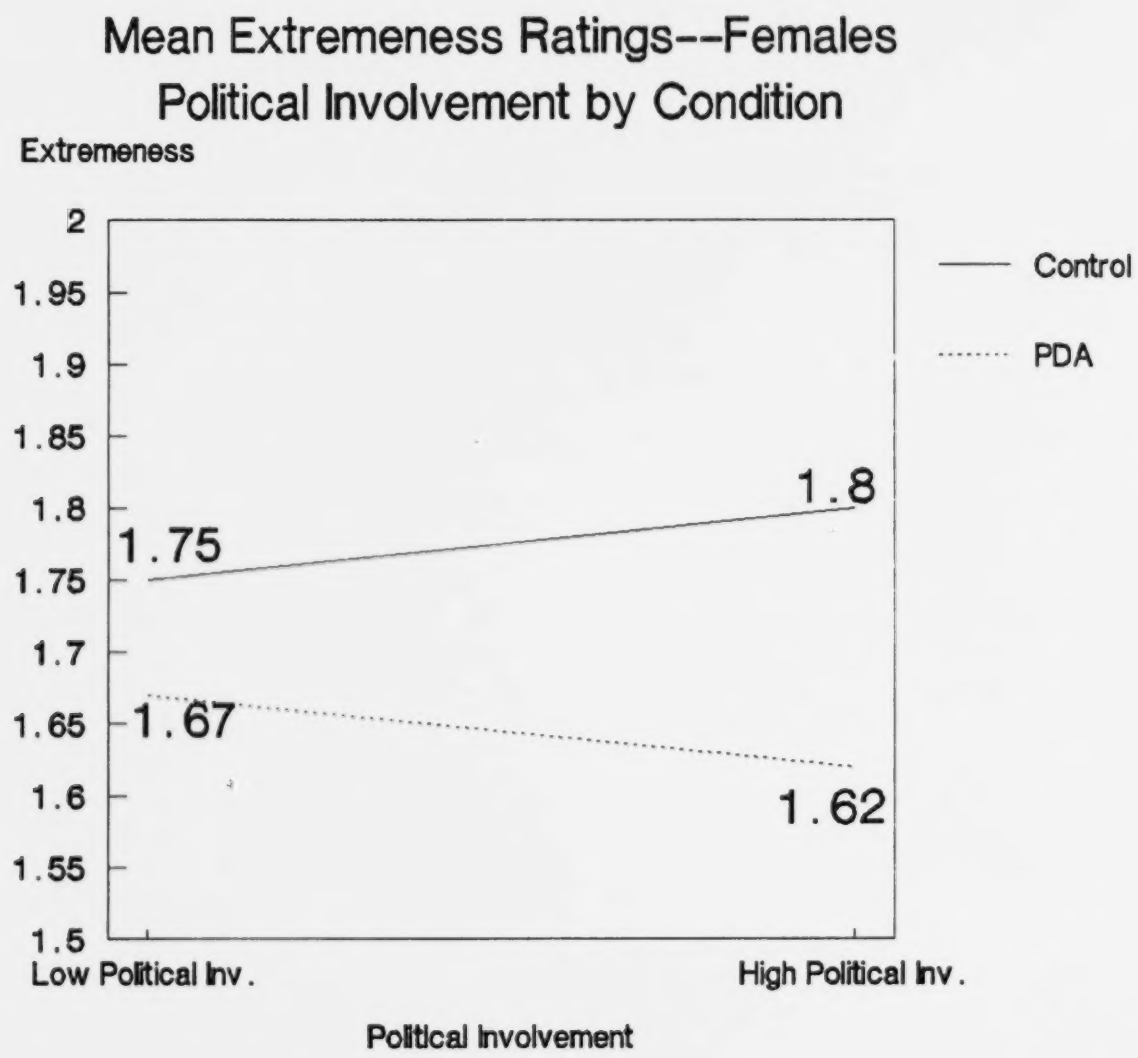
Mean Extremeness Ratings--Females
Political Involvement by Condition
Extremeness
2
1.95
1.9
1.85
1.8
1.75
1.7
1.65
1.6
1.55
1.5
1.75
1.8
1.67
1.62
Control
PDA
Low Political Inv.
High Political Inv.
Political Involvement

FIGURE 2

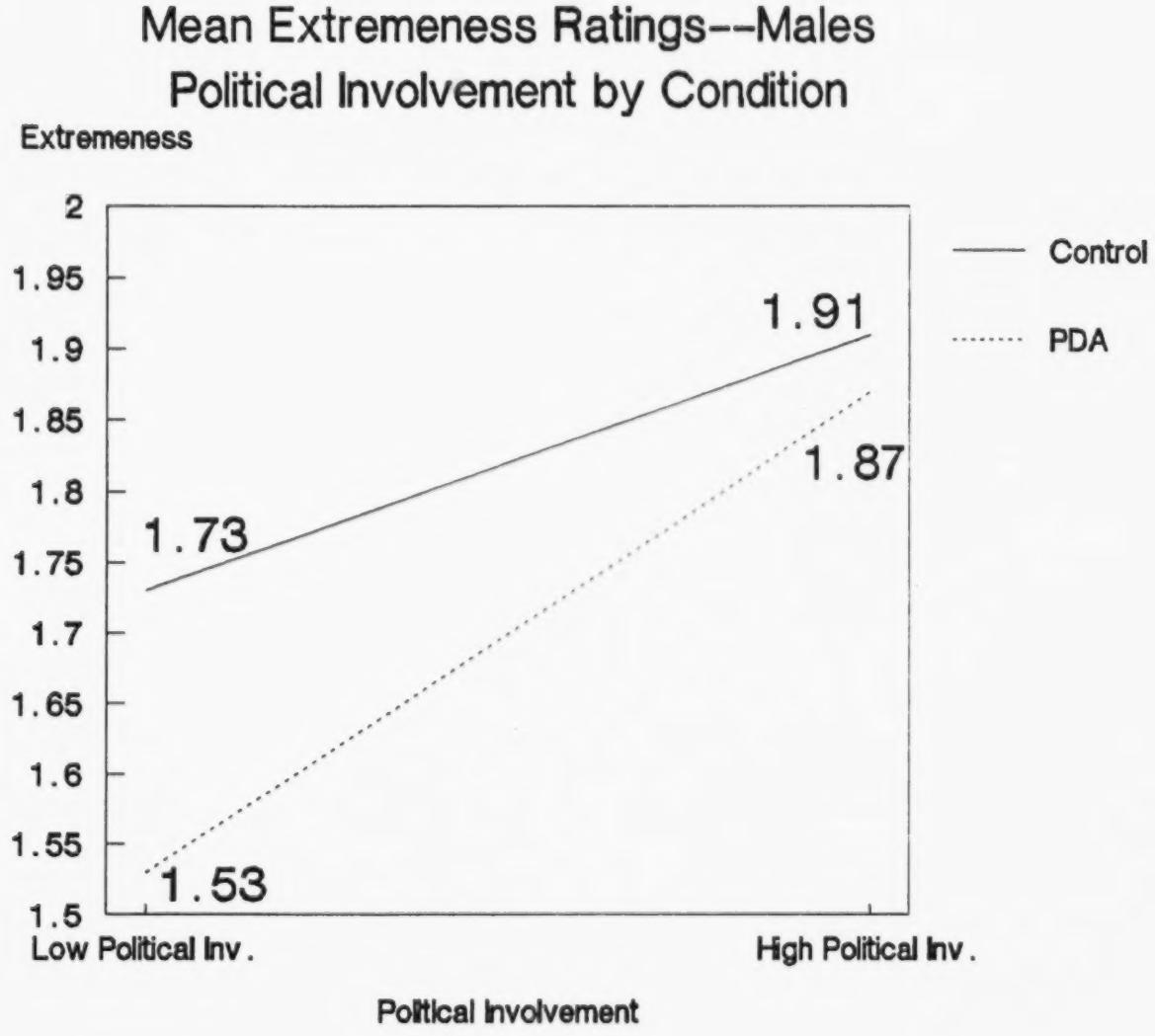
Mean Extremeness Ratings--Males
Political Involvement by Condition
Extremeness
2
1.95
1.9
1.85
1.8
1.75
1.7
1.65
1.6
1.55
1.5
1.91
1.87
1.73
1.53
Control
PDA
Low Political Inv.
High Political Inv.
Political Involvement

FIGURE 3

Sources

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